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Three Women in a City

Crossing Borders and Negotiating National Belonging

Abstract

The major theoretical literature has considered the concept of nation primarily from a macro level. This article explores the question of national belonging departing from an individual's point of view, more precisely from the life story of three migrant women. Migration and transnational practices have challenged the perception of the homogeneity of nations, questioning the idea of fixed boundaries, and showing how different national and social forms of belonging may develop simultaneously through migration experience. Drawing on biographical interviews conducted with three migrant women, Amina El Asri, Gule Yildiz and Zuzana Svitá, the present analysis focusses on the construction of national belonging of the women in an intersectional perspective. Mrs. El Asri, Mrs. Yildiz and Mrs. Svitá originate from different countries (respectively Morocco, Turkey and Czechia). They have different social origins and ages, but share the same sex, their residence in the same city in West Germany and the fact that they all have children. The analysis reveals the profound impact of the socio-historical contexts the women come from on their construction of national belonging, but also of age and of transmission processes to their children. It is mainly through passing on their mother tongue and reshaping their conception of national belonging over time that the women manage to establish strong ties to their children, and contribute, by articulating different lines of belonging, to the redefinition of (trans)nation building processes.

Keywords: Nation, national belonging, transmission, intersectionality, gender

1 Introduction

This article explores the question of national belonging departing from the life story of three migrant women. It aims at analysing the construction of the nation from an individual's point of view, thereby investigating the impact of migration on national belonging, but also of gender, a dimension which has often been neglected in studies on nations (Yuval-Davis 1997, p. 28).

The concept of nation has played an important role in the theoretical literature over the past decades. May it be considered as a space in which cultural and poli-

tical borders are congruent with one another (Gellner 1983), as an “imagined community” arisen through the unification of vernacular languages through print capitalism (Anderson 1991), as a “spiritual principle” expressing the common past memories as well as the renewed consent to live together (Renan 1997, first written in 1882), or as a “common destiny” with a common future (Bauer 2000), the nation has formed an area of interest primarily departing from a macro level.

Furthermore, nation building processes have often been described as homogenizing projects, overseeing the complexity with which individuals position themselves along their complex lines of differences and of belonging. Migration and transnational practices have challenged this perception of homogeneity in many ways (Anthias/Yuval-Davis 2002, p. 31). Seen from the point of view of a nation with fixed boundaries and regulations of membership, migration is often considered as an “anomaly” (Lutz 2007, p. 79), which stirs national categories, which are often considered as “natural” (Wimmer/Glick Schiller 2003) and as preceding migrations. Migration questions the idea of fixed boundaries, but also shows how subjective belongings may shift according to the place migrants live in, and, moreover, how migrants and transmigrants may develop simultaneous forms of plural national and social belonging (Pries 1997).

This article will explore the way individuals negotiate their national belonging in a transnational setting. Leaning on Glick-Schiller et al., we understand transnationalism as a “process by which transmigrants, through their daily activities, forge and sustain multi-stranded social, economic, and political relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement, and through which they create transnational social fields that cross national border” (Glick Schiller et al. 1995, p. 48). In doing so, we will pay special attention to the intersectional approach by exploring the interplay of different axes of belonging such as gender, ethnicity, race or age in a transnational setting (Anthias 2008; Anthias et al. 2013; Amelina 2013). We will first evoke our methodological approach and the way our core finding on the formation of national belonging emerged, before we present the three chosen case studies more closely. Our final comparison will conclude on outlining the main insights on the question of national belonging and the emergence of nation departing from a micro-level.

2 The construction of a case – Depicting the importance of transmission on national belonging

In this article, we will explore the question of national belonging by recurring to the biographical method. This will permit us to gain insights into the ways individuals construct their national belonging as actors, but also in the way their belonging is imposed by discourses, politics or social groupings (Apitzsch 2009, p. 94). The biographical approach will also make it possible to gain a perspective which spans over history, showing the changes of positioning an individual may go through with time and along biographical experience (Apitzsch/Siouti 2007, p. 5). While comparing the different life courses, we will analyse the impact of the different axes of belonging such as gender, ethnicity, “race” or age in an intersectional perspective (Anthias/Yuval-Davis 2002; Crenshaw 2011; Lutz et al. 2011).

We will present three case studies of Amina El Asri, Gule Yildiz and Zuzana Svitá¹, which we chose from our respective PhD-projects. We first searched for life-stories from women with migration background in which the topic of national belonging was raised. It appeared that the three case studies we chose had numerous differences. Amina El Asri originated from a country which has experienced a long history of colonisation and has also been marked by ethnic and political conflicts between Berbers, the original inhabitants of the country, and the Arabs, who conquered the country in the 8th century (Vermeren 2010, p. 106). Gule Yildiz, the Kurdish woman on the other hand referred to a “nation” – the Kurdish one, which doesn’t have its own State at the moment and is being shaped and practiced in transnational spaces (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003). Zuzana Svitá finally originated from a country where the nation, in a common discourse, is seen as a natural unit, closely linked to its state (Holy 1997) and which, since the fall of the iron curtain, has experienced new migration flows. The impact of these migration flows on the construction of the nation is still to be shown.

The women also had different class belongings, ages, and different migration paths. They were brought closer again by the fact that they all lived in the same city in West-Germany which we named Hochstadt. These women, at the same time so different and sometimes so similar, all shared the same geographical space of life in Germany.

All of us worked with the method of reconstructive case analysis (Schütze 1983; Rosenthal 1995), so that we approached our material in a similar way. We authors have a kind of “migrant” and/or cross-border experiences ourselves, coming from different countries as well. This brought “alienation” effects on our joint working process, sensitizing us to the effects of different historical and social contexts on national belonging. Through our common analysis of interview passages, internal similarities of national belonging in our three cases became apparent, that emerged from the life stories, from the meaning the women attributed to their experiences.

After having compared the case studies of Amina El Asri and Zuzana Svitá, a central point in the construction of national belonging came up: the high importance of having *children* and the role of *transmission*. We therefore chose the third case, Gule Yildiz, accordingly, taking having children as a criterion of our case construction. The importance of *intergenerational transmission* for the *construction of national belonging* emerged as a central finding of our joint work. This point hasn’t yet been treated in depth in the existing literature on the construction of nations and national belonging.

After having presented the portraits of these women, we will show how they construct national belonging along gender, transmission processes to their children, language practices, ethnic belonging, or religion. Taking up an intersectional perspective, the analysis will show the importance of the dynamics at work between lines of differences in the construction of national belonging. The comparison of these three women will furthermore reveal the profound impact of contexts, but also of age, on their national belonging, showing how positionings may evolve along collective historical belonging and individual and familial biographical experience.

3 Amina El Asri. A deconstruction and reconstruction of national belonging along contexts of experience

The analysis of Amina El Asri's life story shows the importance of a deconstruction of ethnical and national belonging in family transmission in order to reach family cohesion. This does not only begin after the family's migration to Germany, where the children are socialized in a different context than their parents, but already in Mrs. El Asri's family back in Morocco. Paradoxically, beside this ongoing deconstruction, Amina El Asri at times reifies the idea of national belonging based on "race" in order to legitimize her family's stay in Germany. This case study therefore shows the importance of family links as well as of different contexts – formerly colonized ones and migration countries of arrival on the construction of national belonging. Furthermore, Amina El Asri is the oldest woman of the three case studies we chose to discuss. Her children are meanwhile all over 20 years old, and have left the parental house. Her case study therefore gives an insight into the way the formation and deconstruction of national belonging and family transmission may shape over time.

Amina El Asri was born in a small town in northern Morocco in 1952 as the oldest sibling of her family. Her father was Arabic and while her mother was a Berber. When she was pregnant with her second child, Amina El Asri's father married a second woman. Because she felt treated in an unjust way compared to the second wife, her mother separated from her husband when Amina was about five years old. She took her youngest child with her and returned to her city of origin. Amina El Asri grew up with her father, her stepmother and the enlarged family. She did particularly well in school. At the age of thirteen, she married her husband, following the decision of the grandfather of her husband, a relative of her father. After her marriage, Amina El Asri lived with her in-laws and stopped her studies. Her husband already lived in Germany at that time and came to Morocco during his holidays. She gave birth to her first child, her son Karim at the age of 16. When she was 22 years old, she and her son moved to Germany through the family reunification. There, she had four further children. Eight years after her arrival in Germany, Mrs. El Asri began working in a company, where she worked for 25 years and where she made a career, occupying different work positions going from the cleaning field to the supervision of the house maintenance of her company.

Central themes in the life story of Mrs. El Asri were her school education, the school education of her children, and her contact to Germans and persons of different nationalities. Her openness played, so her children, a central role in their school and professional success in Germany, as it favoured encounters with Germans after their arrival, who helped them to understand the German school system and to communicate with teachers. During an interview, Amina's daughter Loubna mentioned that her mother had even participated in a bowling club and joked: "you can't be more German".

Amina El Asri furthermore evoked having little contact to the Moroccan community in Hochstadt, as the majority of its members are Berbers and speak the Berber language, so that she could not participate in their conversations. This contributed to her strong ties to persons of German origin in her environment. It

was very important to Mrs. El Asri to transmit the Arabic language to her children, so that they could communicate in depth with their family relatives in Morocco.

3.1 Growing up in particularly mixed surroundings

Amina's family background has played a key role in her deconstruction of national and ethnical belonging. As mentioned above, Amina's mother was a Berber, while her father was Arabic. Because of her early age at the separation of her parents, Amina El Asri did not learn the Berber language, her mother's first language. Her siblings, however, have learned this language, as her younger sister grew up with their mother and her oldest brother, following the request of their father, moved into the city of their mother when he married so that she could live with him and his family. Mrs. El Asri insisted on the fact that because she had married so early and had left to live with her in-laws, where all family members were Arabic, she had not been able to spend as much time with her mother as her siblings and therefore did not learn the Berber language. Nevertheless, she kept strong ties to her mother, who lived with her and her family in Germany for two years.

In the interview, Amina El Asri insisted on the strong links between her father and her mother before their separation, despite their different ethnic and social origins. The period in which her mother lived with her in Germany was very important to Mrs. El Asri. She mentions a great proximity, although they did not share the same first language.

Through her familial experiences, Amina El Asri has learned to overcome differences linked to national and ethnical belonging from an early age on: firstly, because her parents, although they did not share the same ethnic and social origins, married and had four children, and secondly, because although she did not speak her mother's first language, she developed an intense relationship to her. Through her family experience, Amina El Asri learned, from her childhood on, that ethnical and linguistic differences do not divide, but can be overcome through emotions and familial attachment.

It is interesting to note that national belonging did not play an important role in the interview with Amina El Asri. This is also linked to the historical context of Morocco Mrs. El Asri has grown up in:

Morocco has stood under a French and Spanish Protectorate from 1912 until 1956. Up until today, there exist two Spanish enclaves in the northern part of the country. Still now, some Moroccans, who work in the enclaves and live outside of them, daily commute between Spain and Morocco. Mrs. El Asri originates from a village near one of these enclaves, which is also located near the former frontier between the Spanish and the French Protectorate. These regions are currently still marked by the use of the French and of the Spanish language.

In addition to this plurality which is linked to colonization, a conflict between Berbers, the original inhabitants of Morocco, and the Arabs, who colonized the country in the 8th century, has had a prevailing influence on the country. Approximately half of the population still speaks the Berber language (Aïd Kaki 2003, p. 106). Berbers have experienced oppression for many centuries, and still experience a lack of political recognition, for example concerning their language. In 2000, a manifest was signed by more than one million Moroccans in order to de-

mand the official recognition of the Berber language and history (Aïd Kaki 2003, p. 112; Vermeren 2010, p. 106).

This situation partly explains the lack of importance of national belonging for Amina. Because of the jigsaw like assemblage of the Moroccan nation, which puts into light paradoxes and dysfunctions of the concept of nation itself, this axis of belonging does not seem to have a dominant importance. It seems that through this contextual influence but also through her migration experience, and her current regular transnational migration between Germany and Morocco, Amina El Asri has deconstructed and put aside the idea of national belonging for a long time.

3.2 The importance and the deconstruction of National belonging in Germany

Living in Germany paradoxically both led Amina El Asri to reify the importance of national and ethnical belonging and to deconstruct it. When she did mention her national belonging in the interview, it was in order to explain and in some way justify her stay in Germany. Here, she recurred to discourses that are strong in Germany and that are based on the idea of the “jus sanguinis”, a representation according to which national affiliation would be given according to biological and genealogical descent. In the conducted interview, Amina established a link between Berbers from the Rif – the region in north Morocco where she comes from and Hesse, the region in Germany where she lives, thereby legitimizing her stay in West-Germany. She mentioned the existence of genealogical trees proving this “familial” and biological descent:

“My mother also belongs to this group of Berbers. They are of Hessian descent. They even all have that genealogical tree, they have from **here**. From Hesse. And I was really once, I was appalled, I was with my children, my husband, we were all in an open air museum with German friends. I was appalled I saw **clothes** of Riffain women. I said “These **here**?” They had been made here. A crocheted shirt. I said that is **ours**! What is it doing **here**? And the man said “You don’t know that people from the Rif are from Hesse?” Really **exactly** the clothes from my **grandmother**! [I: no way] I swear to you **really**! **Nothing** – not even a little crooked or a little – . **Original**.”

In order to prove the idea according to which Berbers from the Rif are of Hessian descent, Mrs. El Asri did not only recur to genealogical trees – written proofs, but also to museums, a recognized institution on “official” knowledge on the culture in Hesse. Later on, Amina El Asri also raised the argument of physical resemblance, and hereby of “race”, as a factor proving the links between Riffians and Hessians.

“But the family of my uncle’s wife they are **really** German with eyes, hair-. They also live at home (meaning in Morocco). They have a **totally** different mentality. The same as Germans. The same as the people here. Not like us. (...) The children of my uncle. They are **entirely** blond. Their eyes are **blue**! **Entirely**! My brother is really blond. And his children are blond. How many does he have? Four children. His girls are **German** girls. When they don’t speak you would say ‘What are those girls?’ When they don’t speak you would say ‘what is that?’”

It appeared that in her speech, Mrs. El Asri adapts to the dominant discourse on national belonging in Germany, which has for a long time predominantly been

based on the principle of *jus sanguinis* and on the idea of “race”. She herewith reifies the idea of ethnicity and race in the construction of national belonging. At the same time, she deconstructs the idea of national homogeneity of space, as “Germans” could, according to their appearance and their mentality or other criteria used in a flexible way, be found either among Hessians living in Hesse or among Riffians living in the Rif. Her discourse can therefore be seen as simultaneously adapting to dominant discourses as well as challenging them. Furthermore, it can be noticed that in the cited excerpts, Amina El Asri mainly refers to Hesse and not to Germany. Throughout the interview, she repeatedly expressed her attachment to Hochstadt, the city in which she has lived since her migration. She thereby stresses that it is a local, direct attachment based on concrete daily interactions, and not an abstract construction of a nation, that matters to her.

Amina’s case shows the interplay between different lines of belonging such as ethnicity, gender and “race” in a transnational setting. Here, family experience plays a central role. Because of her family past, Amina has early on proceeded to a profound deconstruction of difference. This is reinforced through the history of the geographical context in Morocco she comes from. Paradoxically, difference is at the same time reified in the German context she lives in, showing how the interplay between “race”, ethnicity and national belonging may vary according to different transnational settings. The analysis shows that Mrs. El Asri’s negotiation of national belonging is primarily oriented towards her aim of holding her family together: firstly, through deconstructing differences that could create a distance between family members who have been socialized in different contexts, and second in order to legitimize her family’s migration to Germany, that could be put in question by discourses based on the *jus sanguinis*. Gender plays a central role here, as family transmission is often considered as a women’s task.

4. Gule Yildiz. Between “religious” and “national” belonging in transnational spaces

Gule Yildiz was born in a small town in northeastern Turkey in 1974, as the youngest daughter of eight children in a Kurdish family. The inhabitants in her birth town are strongly affected by the sunni-islamic tradition, as she pointed out numerous times in the interview. When Mrs. Yildiz was four years old, she came to Hochstadt with her mother and other siblings to join her father, who had worked there as a “Gastarbeiter”⁴ since several years. Because her mother had a mental disease, she had to accomplish a large part of the household work, and her social contacts with the outside world were strictly limited. Besides going to school, she only went to the mosque with her family, and “had to” wear a headscarf. While her siblings had major difficulties in German schools, and one of her sisters was even sent back to their hometown because of her poor grades, she graduated from the *Gesamtschule* (comprehensive school)⁵ with a general certificate of the *Realschule*, and then successfully accomplished an apprenticeship as a pharmacy assistant. At that time, she was engaged with her husband, one of her relatives in her hometown who migrated to Hochstadt after their wedding. Through this marriage, she began to negotiate the complete setting that had ruled

her life with her family and relatives up to then. After she gave birth to her daughter and one year later to her son, she continued to work. At the time of interview, she was employed in a pharmacy in part time, and went to a Kurdish association in Hochstadt with her two children every Sunday in order to participate in a Kurdish language course.

The central themes in the life story of Mrs. Yildiz are the continual and moderate efforts to pass on to her children something better than what she had experienced in her own childhood, marked by heavy confrontations with her family. She evoked “unjust” relationships within traditional Islamic Kurdish families, where she had suffered from violence from her older brothers and her parents because of her young age and her sex. Through negotiating more justice within her family, she has been carrying out her intention to fight against oppressions as a woman on the one hand, and as a Kurdish “nationality-conscious” person on the other. In her narration, she often uses argumentations along the interplay between religion, tradition, gender and national belonging in her family and among her relatives.

4.1 Negotiating inside of borders: Finding resources in existing setting

In an early passage of her interview, she describes herself as “homeless”, and her social world and its borders along the division of religious belonging. Since her social life in a Germany was marked by secular customs such as casual clothes and alcohol consumption, which the religious Muslim families tend to regard as both “Christian” and corrupted, she primarily faced religious borders. That appeared to be decisive to feel excluded from the resident country, rather than national ones. In her narration, she reflects on the fact that Islamic settings were “forced” on her by her own family, which was symbolized by the “headscarf”. Mrs. Yildiz mainly negotiates freedom *inside* her social borders in order to realize her wishes. Her strategy is to utilize the very norm in which she and her family are embedded. This becomes clearly visible at the beginning of her marriage. On the day when her husband comes to Germany, Mrs. Yildiz “took the chance” – she pulls away her headscarf before she picks him up at the airport:

“But they (her father and her brothers) couldn’t say anything, now I have my husband here. He decides everything for me. My father was so **pissed** off. He said to me, “Are you no more my daughter?”, “I don’t ever want to see you again”. But he spoke about it with my husband, because as woman, I had nothing to say, in his eyes, he discussed this with my husband and said, “Now how can you do that? I brought up my daughter as an Islamic angel with a headscarf, and you come here, and take away my daughter’s headscarf.” My husband said, “I have nothing to do with it.” It was a conflict between my father and my husband. That was for him, he didn’t care. He said to me, “You are a free person, you can do as you wish. As long as you behave normally, you can dress however you want.””

Throwing her headscarf away did not result in totally stepping out of her world. In the transnational context and moment in which she was picking up her husband at the airport who was just arriving to Germany, Mrs. Yildiz found a space of possibilities to realize her wish and throw away her headscarf. This was made possible by the fact that according to the gender order in her family, the control on

her was transferred from her father to her husband as the very result of her marriage.

She used similar strategies, in which she remained within the family order but found resources to change it, in other life situations, such as in inheritance questions, in which she managed to avoid unjust sharing by invoking the Koran.

4.2 Reconstructing Borders: Religion, Language and the Nation

A central theme for Mrs. Yildiz was the issue of national belonging as a “Kurd” as an important part of her struggle with her family and relatives.

Compared with Kurdish people in countries such as Iraq or Iran, the Kurdish people in Turkey have lived under strong assimilation politics, in which even their existence as “Kurdish” had been denied. Since the beginning of the 1920’s, Turkish nationalism has been strongly affected by the idea of the French Nation. According to this form of nationalism, all people should melt into a new Turkish nation by the means of one single national language (Heyd 1979), although the former Ottoman Empire had different religious and national groups. This state-oriented secular nationalism has on the one hand led to oppressive assimilation policies on the non-Turkish people, in particular on Kurdish populations (Mcdowall 2000). On the other hand, this idea of secularism that was welcomed by non-Sunni religious groups like the Alevi (including Turkish and Kurdish followers), has been eroded through the fact that the government used the Sunni-Muslim ties between Turks and Kurds behind the scenes in order to reinforce the “Turkish” national unity. This religious and national complex is at the origin of today’s Kurdish conflict in Turkey. While religion has played an important role in order to integrate all Muslims into the Turkish republican nationalism, Alevi people, a religious minority group who has been oppressed by the Sunni-majority, have been more active in Left-wing movements since the 1960’s. Those secular Left-wing movements became the very basis from which the actual Kurdish movement, the PKK, originated (Özcan 2006). Through migration waves from Turkey to Germany, this problem has been located in transnational political and social spaces between Turkey and Germany (Faist 2000, Ostergaard-Nielsen 2003).

This becomes visible in Mrs. Yildiz’s experience for example, as she visits a weekly Kurdish language course in a Kurdish association in Hochstadt along with her children. Because Alevi Kurdish people dominate in this association, her relatives in Turkey don’t want their relatives in Germany to be in touch with such “faithless terrorists”, as they are described on Turkish TV, but want them to visit Turkish mosques. One of her cousins took distance from her family, because his parents in Turkey said that they were “not believers, not Moslems”. In these surroundings, Mrs. Yildiz tries to overcome this religious-political split among Kurdish people by emphasizing the importance of learning one’s mother tongue, separating it from religious issues. She mentions a conversation she has had with her relatives on this topic:

“They (her relatives) don’t dare to say that they are Kurds. (A brother of her sister-in-law) was in prison for about 12 years. He fought for the Kurds. I said, “your brother gave his flesh and blood, only so that you can live in freedom, freely speak your language, so that

the Turks won't oppress us. And what do you do?" She speaks Kurdish perfectly, "Why don't you speak Kurdish?" Her children have learned a few words from us, they didn't even know before that they are Kurds."

Here, she connects transmitting the Kurdish language to her children with the Kurdish struggle in her homeland. Simultaneously, she shows understanding for their reasons for not speaking Kurdish, as one's engagement in the Kurdish movement inevitably leads to harsh family situations in Turkey. One pays for his/her political involvement with his/her family. Through her effort to take her children to a Kurdish language course, however, Mrs. Yildiz aims at bridging this alternative choice of "politics or family", and to unite them, thereby realizing her political goal within the family space. It is within her family and with her relatives that she has been negotiating the borders of transnational communities involved in national movements. For her, belonging to the Kurdish nation neither emerges as something secured by state institutions nor as a total engagement in organizational activities, but as something to struggle with in everyday life, by conscious efforts to speak and transmit the Kurdish language, which is one of the goals of struggles in her homeland.

4.3 Positioning in locality as a biographical resource

As we have seen above, Mrs. Yildiz's self-perception of national belonging draws on highly political discourses and experiences within her family in transnational spaces between Turkey and Germany. This doesn't mean, however, that she has not been affected by interactions within her host society. As those who came to Germany at an early age and who spent their whole education in German institutions, she describes how different what she has learned in Germany might be from what she may have learned in Turkey or from what her husband experienced there

"But I grew up here in Germany. (...) You can live in peace, with many nationalities, and you can teach it to others, if you have already learned it in preschool. And in this city, it is so multicultural, that I have grown up with 40 different nations. I know, from every-, I know a little bit from Buddhists, from Moslems, from Christians, from Jews, from every, I learned a little bit. And I'm happy with that. It is kind of fun to know persons from every nation. And in preschool we learn to eat together, and to play together. There is no racism, there is no separation, while in Turkey this is totally different. In Turkey you will learn nationalism from a very early age on. Not so many nations ... like here in Germany."

There is a clear boundary that is named a "national" one, but it actually refers to religious categories. While religious belongings appears to be fatal for her, feeling excluded from Germany as a foreigner, the experience to have "eaten and played together" with other "nations", that Mrs. Yildiz contrasts with the single nationalism in Turkey, is positively acquired on the basis of the institutionalized and de-facto multicultural surroundings in Hochstadt. This forms a biographical basis for her to negotiate boundaries in her own family and with her relatives and to defend her multi-layered membership both in her religious affiliation and in the Kurdish association she visits.

5 Zuzana Svitá. Shifting 'home' and negotiating belongings

Zuzana Svitá was born in 1977 in a small town in northern Czechia. She spent her childhood in this town and attended school there. After secondary school, she started to work as a seamstress in a nearby factory, since there was a lack of other work opportunities in the region. Since promotion possibilities were denied to her, she soon decided to quit and go to Germany as an Au Pair instead. Her plan was to stay there for one year and improve her language skills, which would help her to start university studies in Czechia. Nevertheless, she spent nearly two years with a family in a small town in Bavaria and cared for a young child and the household. During this time, she repeatedly tried to pass the entrance examinations to various universities in Czechia⁶, each time without success. Therefore, instead of going back to Czechia, she moved to Hochstadt in Germany to her best friend from her home town, who was living and working there as an Au Pair as well. Her friend helped her to find a job in another family, where Mrs. Svitá worked for about three years. During this period, she signed up for university in Hochstadt and graduated in 2007. In the course of the first year of her studies, she met her future husband. Shortly before her graduation, she gave birth to her daughter Klara and to a son, Jan, two years later.

Moving to Germany after school meant an important turn in Mrs. Svitá's biography, since new perspectives, such as moving to Hochstadt and starting her studies there, opened up for her. While she moved between places, the notions of "home" shifted as well. As she explains, she feels "at home" in Germany, or more precisely in Hochstadt. Also her social contacts meanwhile prevailed in Hochstadt. In Czechia, as she states, "bridges were torn down"⁷ and social contacts were interrupted. Nevertheless, she still wants to leave Germany at some point for some other country in order to make other experiences. She developed this desire when her efforts to find a qualified job in Hochstadt after her graduation had failed. Similarly as before, migration became a strategy for her to overcome the limited opportunities "at home" and to gain new perspectives. While moving her "home", Zuzana Svitá establishes a new space of possibilities, spanning transnationally over the borders of national states. Within this newly established space, she reworks the notion of national belonging.

The topic of national belonging especially gains importance for Zuzana when she speaks about her children who are growing up in a different national context than her. Her children and husband, who himself has a migration background as his parents migrated to Germany from former Yugoslavia, present the main significant others who serve her as a mirror to negotiate her own positioning and belonging in everyday practice. Zuzana's family therefore forms a space in which the notion of nation has been constantly reworked along the ongoing construction of differences and common spaces of belonging. Furthermore, the notion of national belonging is also challenged by transnational links which she creates for herself and her children.

5.1 (Re-) constructing the differences and common spaces in family dynamics

“But we have it in the family, because my husband is Croatian, I am Czech so I speak Czech, his parents speak Croatian to the children, the children grow up in Germany and it is, Klara was really I don't know. Really an ideal child. She spoke only Czech. And it is not like that anymore. So with Jan it will probably be the same. It really **hurts**! I am really sorry for it. But I cannot expect my children to differentiate here somehow, to be-. We are **living** here and we decided for it, so I have to let them watch German fairy tales, listen to German songs, they will have German friends. But I am holding firm to it.”

In her life story, Zuzana Svitá outlines the special dynamics of her family concerning national belonging: her husband has parents coming from former Yugoslavia, she herself is Czech and their children are growing up in Germany. Interesting is her statement “I am Czech so I speak Czech”, which shows that the understanding of Czech national belonging is closely connected to the language for her. Moreover, Mrs. Svitá underlines the role of (social and geographical) locations for the processes of belonging. Contrary to her children, Zuzana Svitá spent her childhood and adolescence in Czechoslovakia, respectively in the Czech Republic, and was therefore affected by different cultural, political and social contexts than her children who are growing up in Germany. In her perception, the German environment and culture will therefore have effects on them as well. Her understanding of belonging seems to be influenced by dominant Czech discourses about the nation and by the socio-historical development of the country. The Czech nation building in 19th century was to great extent based on the ethnic-cultural model. The main argument for the establishment of the modern Czechoslovakian state in 1918 was the protection of the Czech nation, which, in the national discourses, had suffered during the last centuries under the Habsburg monarchy. The Czech nation was construed as having existed for a millennium with its unity of culture and language and being strongly related to the territory of nowadays Czechia. The perception of common language, culture and shared territory have thus been the main categories along which Czech national belonging has been construed (Holy 1997 p. 38, pp. 50–51).

In her narration, Zuzana Svitá draws not only comparisons to her children, who grow up in a different context than she did, but also between herself and her husband. Mrs. Svitá positions herself in opposition to her husband who, despite of his family background, represents “the German” and the “big city” experience of childhood, with its consumption, acceleration of life and ever complex life structures. However, while outlining the differences between herself and her husband, she simultaneously construes a common space based on their ethnic origins: a common Slavic space with its specific attributes.

“It is a bit ehm a bit different here as I don't have many contacts to Germans, for instance, though through my husband it is somehow. My husband of course has German friends. But after all I feel that we that we found each other. That the Slav spark was set up inside him again. (Laughing) And it is something what for instance I probably need. Also about bringing up the children, it differs a lot.”

Zuzana Svitá explains the closeness between herself and her husband in ethnic terms. In her presentation, the “Slavic origin” developed in him over time after they met and became a couple. She constructs a space, a “Slavic space”, which they both share and which also influences their perception about the rising up of

their children. The shared “Slavic” cultural and lingual background plays, according to Mrs. Svitá, not only an important role in their relationship, but also influences the contact to Mrs. Svitá’s parents, to whom she keeps tight links, to her hometown and, indirectly, to Mrs. Svitá’s past.

Zuzana Svitá emphasizes the role of language. As the Croatian and Czech languages have a similar lingual background, it is possible for her husband to communicate with her parents. Also here, she underlines the perceived closeness of the languages rather than their differences, to demonstrate the common space reconstructed with the help of seemingly close ethnic origins. By doing so, she makes an effort to biographically establish links concerning nationality and attributes connected to it between herself, her children and her husband. Zuzana’s family, in which three languages coexist, becomes the space of continuous learning and creation of new language and cultural practices not only for the children, but also for the parents and the close relatives. Passing on languages to their children plays a crucial role in the negotiation and in the transmission of national belonging.

5.2 The struggle to pass on national belonging in the context of migration

“I speak Czech to them at home, my friends are Czech (laughing), now I was looking in the internet, I was searching for someone, because there are so few Czechs here. (...) And with Jana⁸ we then – Jana put up an advertisement on the internet, which was **really very difficult** for me to find. Ehm, in Munich there is something Czech, in Berlin there is something Czech, in Hochstadt there is simply **nothing**. So at least this. At least I have found these pages and that we see each other from time to time. Little though, but. Still it is nice when one then has a child, that someone else has a child too, who tries to bring them up or so the way you do. At least for instance with the language or so that it still had at least some relation to the Czech culture or to the fairy tales and songs.”

In trying to pass on the Czech language and other cultural elements to her children, Zuzana Svitá seeks a community of other Czechs living in Hochstadt to support each other in doing so and to establish a Czech speaking “micro-world” for their children. As she can’t find such a network, she herself establishes a Czech mothers’ network with one of her friends. In this context, where the social circle is composed only of women, gender appears to be an important dimension along which the transmission of language and culture is structured.

However, for Mrs. Svitá, it is not only important to transmit the language and a part of the Czech culture to her children, but also to pass them on the legal citizenship.

“Hmm, I still feel being a Czech. (Laughing) Also my children have the Czech citizenship, too, German and Czech, it was very important to me. I don’t know. So they also have it somehow written on paper. So they also have another, I don’t know. So that they wouldn’t have any problems to buy a house or something like that in Czechia.”⁹

Although her children grow up in a different national context than her, Zuzana Svitá seeks to transmit her own national belonging to her children as well as to establish access to the Czech legal system of property based on citizenship. Thus, in her understanding, national belonging does not only have a cultural dimension,

but also a legal one. By establishing the transnational linkages for her children and herself, she creates not only links with her own biographical and migration experience, but establishes a new space of possibilities for her children which spans over national borders. The access to legal frameworks and language plays a crucial role here.

6 Biographies in Comparison

Departing from the biographical narrations of three women, Amina El Asri, Gule Yildiz and Zuzana Svitá, we aimed at gaining an insight into how they construct national belonging and how this may enrich the theoretical concept of nation. The importance of *intergenerational transmission* for the *construction of national belonging* emerged as a central result of our analysis. In an exclusive nation state system, women do not usually play a crucial role in the nation building process (Anthias/Yuval-Davis 2002, p. 28) because the formal institutions of the state fulfil this task to a large extent. Different authors, however, have shown that women do play a central role in the formation of nations in the processes of migration, because they traditionally accomplish a large part of the educational and transmission family work, and pass on elements such as the language (called “mother tongue”), religious or cultural understandings, which are all pillars of the nation building, to their children (Anthias/Yuval-Davis 2002).

The women negotiated national belonging in a different way. Amina El Asri, because of her family history, had already deconstructed the idea of national belonging a long time ago. Ethnicity, “race” and national belonging however related in a new way after her arrival in Germany, showing how lines of belonging may articulate differently according to the transnational contexts the persons are in. In contrast, Zuzana Svitá did not deconstruct the notion of national belonging during her childhood as Amina El Asri did. Nevertheless, she reworked its meaning during the course of her migration process. It was within her “multinational” family, that national belonging gained importance and served as a means for negotiating differences. In order to construct a “common space” which would transcend the differences among the family members based on national belonging, she referred to the similarity of the languages and a common “Slavic” origin of herself and her husband. In the process of comparing and searching for common spaces she has continuously reworked her understandings of national belonging. Gule Yildiz, on her side, held two different categories to which she “should” belong. While she has faced the fatal religious border between her origin and host society, she has found the resource to gain more freedom in the religious belonging. With contrasting her relatives in Turkey, she has tried to transmit to her children not the religious identity as Moslem but the national identity as “Kurds” through language. It was her effort to switch focus on belongings between religious and national, that connected her family to an imagined Kurdish nation and localized them in “multicultural German society” simultaneously. All however revealed to be primarily motivated by transmission processes to their children: Amina El Asri and Zuzana Svitá in order to reach family cohesion and proximity, and Gule Yildiz in order to negotiate a new positionality towards gender, religious affiliation and political ac-

tivism. Here, the role of different socio-historical contexts and the power of particular *discourses* about nation in the countries of origin became apparent. The women's axes of belonging such as ethnicity, "race" or religion also showed to evolve along *time*. In all three cases, national belonging was not static, but evolved along historical and biographical experiences. Mrs. El Asri's pronounced deconstruction of national belonging for example is linked to a long lasting biographical work, which started with the mixed marriage of her parents, and was reinforced by the necessity to strengthen familial bridges in a migratory context. It is to expect that Mrs. Svitá's national belonging will evolve with time, perhaps resembling Mrs. El Asri's deconstruction in order to establish more similarities between herself and her children.

While passing on their mother tongue and their culture of origin and telling their children about their country of origin and about Germany, Amina El Asri, Gule Yildiz and Zuzana Svitá actively contribute in (re)shaping the (trans)national forms of belonging of their children and thereby participate in (trans)nation building processes. Here, the shift between national and transnational belonging becomes visible. The language in particular gains different meanings in diverse biographical contexts for our interviewees. It was the instrument for continuing and contributing to the Kurdish nation for Gule Yildiz, the inseparable feature of national belonging for Zuzana Svitá, and the instrument for maintaining transnational family ties for her children for Amina El Asri. Transmitting their language and culture of origin was furthermore important, because it enabled to establish strong links between themselves and their children. However, while Gule Yildiz and Amina El Asri can draw on existing communities of migrants from their country origin and on already established transnational ties in their area of destination, Zuzana Svitá, as one of the pioneers of "new migration flows" (Koser/Lutz 1998) between Czechia and Germany, is still in the act of their creation.

Locality and the specific place the women lived in in Germany also plays a role in the negotiation process of national belonging. Relating to local categories, such as Hesse, the Rif and Hochstadt allows Mrs. El Asri to avoid constructing her belonging along national state units, thereby ensuring a closeness to her children, who were attached to the same local spaces as her. Mrs. Yildiz herself constructs her belonging neither departing from her state of origin, nor from her current place of life, as her statement "I am homeless" indicates. However, it is important to her to position herself in the Kurdish diaspora that has no official state, but that has been developed as an imagined "nation" and practiced in everyday life through efforts to transmit the Kurdish language to her children. In contrast, Zuzana Svitá relates herself both to the country of origin and to local categories. She construes her positioning as a Czech woman who had different biographical experiences than people growing up in Germany. At the same time she strongly related herself to Hochstadt, the city of her current residence. Hochstadt not only becomes her "home", but also the place where her children were growing up and developing their lives. The attachment to Hochstadt allows her to express her belonging to the place her family lived, while not relating to the country of their residence.

This article showed the importance of considering nation-building processes from an intergenerational perspective, thereby enlarging the scope from individuals to their relationships to close family members. The interplay of different lines of belonging, which may shift in transnational settings, also became visible. National belonging, furthermore, revealed to change over time and through bio-

graphical experience. The biographical reconstruction of these three presented case studies have enabled us to gain insights into the impact of gender on national belonging, which for the women presented in this article went with an intensive reflexion on how to shape practices which would hold their families together across complex national, but also religious and cultural boundaries.

Notes

- 1 All names of persons and cities in this article are fictitious.
- 2 Amina is referring to an open air museum in the region on the history of rural life in Hesse which she visited with her family and German friends she had met through her work.
- 3 Indeed, it appeared during the fieldwork that the resemblance between the “Riffian” and the “German” culture seems to be a shared “knowledge” among the migrants from Morocco in Germany. Amina explained during the interview that this knowledge is also shared by Germans. It was the German friend mentioned in the interview excerpt for example who first told her about the historical and ethnical shared roots between Riffians and Hessians. He himself, so Amina, had read about this in books. Linguistic similarities between the German and the Riffian language were frequently evoked in the field.
- 4 German word for guest workers.
- 5 Germany is characterized by its tripartite school system. After primary school, students in Germany pursue their education at one of the three school types: the Gymnasium, which goes until the 13th grade and ends with the obtainment of the “Abitur”, the only diploma which enables students to enter University, the Realschule, which ends after 10th grade and the Hauptschule, which ends after 9th grade. Both the Realschule and the Hauptschule lead to apprenticeships. The Gesamtschule forms an exception to these school types and unites all students. It is during the schooling years of the students at the Gesamtschule that it is decided whether they will finish school with the Abitur or a diploma of the Realschule or the Hauptschule. Gesamtschulen, which may be seen as progressive in terms of equal chances at school, are however rare in Germany.
- 6 Entrance examinations are required for the access to most Czech universities. Only a limited amount of students who successfully pass the exams can sign up for their studies. The chances of being accepted depends on the universities and on the subjects of study.
- 7 As she further states, “bridges were torn down” not only by her own migration, but by the fact that most of the young people left this region due to the lack of job opportunities in order to better off their situation and opportunities. However, contrary to her friends, the family of Zuzana Svitá has stayed firmly rooted in their town. Mrs. Svitá keeps regular contact to her parents and visits them with all her family several times a year. Thus, the bridges between her and her family stayed solid, contrarily to those to most of her friends.
- 8 Jana is Zuzana’s friend whom she met in Hochstadt.
- 9 Indeed, the access to housing property in Czechia is linked to having the Czech citizenship.

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